

## FLORIDA'S APPROACH TO PROBATION AND PAROLE STAFF SAFETY

by Joseph E. Papy, Director, Community Corrections Division, Florida Department of Corrections

Concern about increasing crime rates and violence has required Florida's probation and parole services to focus more intensively on officer and office safety. A growing emphasis on offender accountability along with the changing role of the officer from a rehabilitative to a proactive enforcer have combined to make probation work more adversarial than ever before. Our agency's commitment to field work as the cornerstone of public safety places our officers in dangerous environments with dangerous persons.

**In *New Approaches to Staff Safety***, Robert L. Thornton and John Shireman state: "While performing their duties, most probation and parole officers will be victimized . . . Officers see their clients as more dangerous, posing more of a threat to staff safety. There is a gradual recognition of the need for training on issues such as firearms and body armor."<sup>1</sup>

William Parsonage states that his review of the research " . . . suggests that the problem is both extensive and pervasive. Across studies, the career rates of experiencing hazardous incidents range from 38 to 50 percent. When only probation and parole workers with direct responsibility for supervising clients in the field are considered, the victimization rate is significantly higher."<sup>2</sup>

### Task Force Recommendations

In May 1991, Harry K. Singletary, Jr., the Florida Corrections Secretary, organized a statewide Staff Safety Task Force for Probation and Parole Services. The charge to the task force was to provide recommendations to the Secretary and executive staff for enhancing staff safety both in the field and in the office.

The task force included two representatives from each of the five geographic regions of the corrections department, two representatives from the Florida Police Benevolent Association (the probation officers' collective bargaining agent), and four at-large representatives appointed by the Secretary. The task force presented 11 recommendations in December 1991. In order of priority, they were:

1. The creation of a Correctional Probation Specialist position to carry high-risk, sex offender, mental health, and other cases that require supervision by an officer with a substantial length of service and more training and job experience than a regular officer.

2. The purchase of cellular telephones and law enforcement radios to allow immediate and direct communication with local law enforcement communication dispatch centers.
3. Enhanced office security standards, including additional interior and exterior lighting, use of lexan glass to separate the lobby areas from the clerical areas, secure buzzer pass-through doors, passive infrared motion detectors connected to an after-hours burglar alarms, and smoke and fire alarms systems.
4. Separate bathroom facilities for offenders, staff, and urine testing.
5. Parking adjacent to the office location.
6. Vaults and safes for secure storage of negotiable instruments.
7. Availability of soft body armor for voluntary use by staff.
8. Creation of an intelligence reporting system and gang database.
9. Standardization of personal safety equipment, such as pepper spray and flashlights.
10. Authorization to allow staff to carry firearms voluntarily.
11. An agency requirement to photograph all offenders under supervision and to maintain current photographs of offenders and staff.

All recommendations of the task force were adopted by the Executive Staff and implemented.

## **Voluntary Use of Firearms**

**Legislative authorization.** One of the most significant recommendations was that probation officers be authorized to voluntarily carry firearms while on duty. By state law, officers could carry their personal firearms only while off duty prior to this authorization.

Although the existing state law seemed to permit the agency the discretion to authorize officers to carry firearms while on duty, the agency decided to seek specific legislative authority. A law authorizing officers to carry firearms on duty was passed by both houses of the Florida Legislature in 1992 but was vetoed by the governor. The following year, a compromise piece of legislation was introduced and subsequently became law without the governor's signature.

Provisions of the law are as follows:

- It authorizes state probation officers to carry firearms while on and off duty.
- It prohibits the agency from expending state funds to purchase the firearms, ammunition, or any accessories.
- It allows the officer to obtain firearms training while on state time and at state expense.

**Impact of firearms.** Since Florida's probation and parole officers have been authorized to carry firearms, there has been one instance of an officer involved in a shooting. Both the officer and the offender were injured in the shooting; fortunately, neither was fatally injured.

In this shooting, the officer was making routine field visits and stopped at a community controllee's home. Unknown to the officer, the community controllee had told members of the community that he intended to kill the officer. It was subsequently learned that the plan was developed in retaliation for the officer's arrest of the offender's brother and the brother's return to prison on a violation charge.

Immediately after the officer left the offender's home, the offender shot at the officer in his vehicle. The officer was shot at three times and was struck twice. The officer lost control of his vehicle, which struck a tree. The offender continued to advance toward the officer, but the officer drew his weapon and returned gunfire, striking the offender three times. A large crowd gathered and surrounded the officer's vehicle. Fortunately, two uniformed deputy sheriffs had heard the gunfire and responded to the scene, which brought control to the situation. The offender was later charged with attempted murder of a law enforcement officer.

### **Continuing Efforts to Reduce Victimization**

It is clear that officers who conduct field supervision-especially of high-risk cases that require intensive supervision-place themselves at the greatest risk for victimization and danger. These officers should pay particular attention to the recommendations of the Florida staff safety task force.

Staff safety is a mutual responsibility of the officer and the agency. Together, they should conduct a continuous, dynamic review of what can be done to improve safety. Periodic, timely reviews of incidents enable the agency to learn from past experiences. Immediate corrective action should then be taken to prevent additional circumstances of victimization.

A final note: the National Institute of Corrections' 1993 publication, *New Approaches to Staff Safety*, by Thornton and Shireman, should be required reading for all probation and parole staff in America.

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### **Notes**

1. Robert L. Thornton and John H. Shireman, *New Approaches to Staff Safety*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 1993). p. 8.
2. William Parsonage, *Worker Safety in Probation and Parole* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 1990). p. 21. ■